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A Tale of Two Classics

A group of cheery women crowd around a simple wooden table, their laughter and smiles fill the room with a welcoming, homey atmosphere. Outside the small glass paned window, snow twirls and dances in the chilly wind as it coats the streets of 19th century London. Fast forward to 1949; four women perch at the four corners of a dark wooden mah jong table inlaid with jade. They sit primly in vibrant silk dresses, their lips squeezed together in concentration as they lay their white tile pieces down on the table methodically. The window lays open allowing a soft breeze to cut through the San Francisco heat. Though no one talks each woman understands the others. Watching knowingly they all glance out into the night, across the bay, perhaps all the way to China, where an unspoken past bonds them together. Despite setting and location differences, the novels Little Women by Louisa May Alcott and The Joy Luck Club by Amy Tan are almost identical in the way they follow the lives of a group of women as they experience hardship, love and loss, not to mention the many adventures they have along the way. From the style of writing, to the strength and role of women in society at the time and the bond the characters share, these two classic novels could have been written together in the same time period by the same author for how closely they resemble each other.

Even starting with something as simple the plotline of the novels and the style of writing, the two books similarities emerge immediately. In both novels a climax is indiscernible if existent at all. Each section reads like its own short story where climaxes may appear four or five times throughout a novel and chapters are absent. In Little Women Louisa May Alcott’s simple style of writing draws you in like that of a masterful storyteller. “They all drew to the fire, Mother in the big chair with Beth at her feet, Meg and Amy perched on either arm of the chair, and Jo leaning on the back, where no one would see any sign of emotion if the letter should happen to be touching”. Alcott’s description of the March girls eagerly crowding around to listen to the letter their beloved father has sent home from the frontlines of the war, reads more like a note to an old friend than a novel. Here you almost feel as though you are there with the March sisters next to the hearth, anticipation filling your already full heart; feeding off of the joy of more cheerful, hopeful news or the deepest sorrow of a notice of injury or death. In these few short, even commonplace lines Alcott creates a feeling of utmost suspense with a subtlety unknown to the common reader; yet leaving them with a never ending urge to read on intently, eager to discover the fate of the March sisters. The same can be said for Amy Tan, who’s somber, straightforward style of writing grabs the curious reader from the first sentence, never to relinquish its grasp. Here Jing-Mei Woo introduces us to her life story and her new found predicament. “My father has asked me to be the fourth corner at the Joy Luck Club. I am to replace my mother, whose seat at the mah jong table has been empty since she died two months ago. My father thinks she was killed by her own thoughts”. Tan, like Alcott, provides a subtle hook that engages the reader enough to give the beginning of her story a clever amount of suspense. Tan and Alcott both have an amazing gift for describing the basics of a situation while leaving out the real meat of the story that readers find so fascinating: the why. Tan, like Alcott, even prefers to separate passages in her book into the lives of a specific character or story. Together both books read like a passage from the author’s personal diary or an interview conducted with an old relative. Some critics argue that both books lack in the action department, however once you begin reading either, the question is not how far you’ll get, but when you’ll stop.

While both writers style’s mirror each other its intriguing how both novels depict a time or place where women’s place in society is below that of men. Whether it be 19th century London or 20th century China, a woman’s main role was to have and raise children. Men seldom married for love, but for money connections, or power. In the Joy Luck Club, Amy Tan’s character An-Mei Hsu recalls a servant showing her around a large house in China where she would live with her mother who was a concubine. “As Yan Chang guided me through the house she explained which rooms belonged to First Wife and the other concubines, who were called Second Wife and Third Wife”. In old China the first wife existed solely to bear the man children, whereas any additional wives were merely for pleasure. These additional “wives” were often from a lower social class and normally had little or no rights. Here Tan illustrates both the moral and cultural differences between women in early 20th century China and the modern American women of today. Though Alcott is not far off, her version may be more glorified and by our standards more morally intact, but the role of a woman during the time period remains the same. Alcott paints the reader a clear picture of the loneliness of a woman after she has completed her duty of marrying. But, for Meg her main duty is to look after her children. “Whether they like it or not, women are virtually put upon the shelf as soon as the wedding excitement is over, and most of them might exclaim as did a very pretty woman the other day, ‘I’m as handsome as ever, but no one takes any notice of me because I’m married.’ Though Meg did not face this affliction, because she was a womanly little woman, the maternal instinct was very strong, and she was entirely absorbed in her children to the utter exclusion of everything and everybody else”. Through the eyes of Alcott we are afforded a glimpse into the past where it was a girl’s duty to win a husband, and then have children. But, after that little was left for them to do but clean the house or fix meals while their husband was at work. The majority of a woman’s life was spent in solitude, with a husband gone all day and children off at school. Both novels portray the hardships women faced as minimally important members of society at the time. Through their character’s experiences both authors create a very real conflict that leaves readers wanting to right the injustices both women faced.

While some arguments in the two above paragraphs could be debated by some classical literature aficionados, there is no denying that both stories share a common theme of the love and bonds shared by the characters. Little Women and The Joy Luck Club both leave you with the sense that while the characters experience many trying times throughout their lives they ultimately realize that having each other is what’s really important. In Little Women, the March girls lived in poverty, and their father had gone to fight in a war. All they had left was their mother and themselves. Louisa May Alcott put it perfectly. “For each girl knew in her heart that she has something more precious than money, sisters”. As bonded as any four sisters could be, the March girls ultimately realize that though they covet money, fine clothes, and a large homes, nothing will have had a greater impact on their lives than each other. The same thing happens for Jing-Mei Woo, who by the end of the Joy Luck Club fulfills her mother’s last wish before she died, to find her two long-lost half sisters in China. “As soon as I get beyond the gate, we run toward each other, all three of us embracing, all hesitations and expectations forgotten. – They look familiar. And now I see what part of me is Chinese. It is so obvious. It is my family. It is in our blood. After all these years, it can finally be let go”. Jing Mei makes a startling realization after finally meeting and embracing the twin sisters her mother always wanted her to know. “My sisters and I stand arms around each other, laughing and wiping the tears from each other’s eyes. The flash of the Polaroid goes off and my father hands me the snapshot, My sisters and I watch quietly together, eager to see what develops. The gray-green surface changes to the bright colors of our three images, sharpening and deepening all at once. And although we don’t speak, I know we all see it: Together we look like our mother, Her same eyes, her same mouth, open in surprise to see, at last, her long cherished wish”. While fulfilling her mother’s wish Jing-Mei finds peace with her past and a new hope for a future she and her sisters can share together. Though life may not always be kind the women in both novels learn that where happiness is lost, family will always be there to fill the void.

While the two classic novels Little Women by Louisa May Alcott and The Joy Luck Club by Amy Tan draw parallels on the topic of writing style, strength of women in society and bond shared by characters, they are both unique and wonderful in their own right. Never should one make the mistake of reading the brilliant work of Miss Alcott without picking up the dazzling volume by Ms. Tan or vice versa. Though their similarities are rather intriguing they are two classics who own their own separate places in the world of great literature.